NAME	:	Pawar Rahul Hanumant
MOB. NO.	:	7798192799
E-MAIL ID	:	rahulhpawar1995@gmail.com
CATEGORY	:	Open
RESEARCH SUPERVISOR:		Dr. Dnyaneshwar Subhash Choudhari
MOB. NO.	:	97655 92979
E-MAIL ID	:	d_choudhari@rediffmail.com
SUBJECT	:	ENGLISH
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SWAMI RAMANAND TEERTH MARATHWADA UNIVERSITY, NANDED

A Proposal for Doctoral Research Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities
entitled

"THE TRAVAILS OF GROWTH: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN THE NEAPOLITAN NOVELS BY ELENA FERRANTE."

Research Student:

Rahul Hanumant Pawar

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Dnyaneshwar Subhash Choudhari
Department of English
Maharashtra Mahavidyalaya,
Nilanga, Dist. Latur

Research Centre

P.G. Department of English & Research Centre in English
Dayanand College of Arts,
Latur – 413531 (MS)

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"THE TRAVAILS OF GROWTH: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN THE NEAPOLITAN NOVELS BY ELENA FERRANTE."

I. Introduction:

Elena Ferrante is an Italian pseudonymous novelist. Her books are originally published in Italian and later translated into English by Ann Goldstein. Ferrante's novels are realistic and sensual. Her style is immersive. Her main subject is the way women are shaped, deformed, and sometimes even destroyed by the social background they are from. Her novels depict the inner conflicts of intelligent women like – novelists, professors etc. They leave their place to find good jobs. And shake up by some surprising event and lose their grip on reality.

The writing of Elena Ferrante is in continuation with the tradition of female writers expressing female sensibilities through their fictional works. The female lived experiences find an outlet in their works. Her novels show the influences of the past and contemporary writers like Simone de Beauvoir, who in her seminally important book *The Second Sex* (1949) famously proclaims that, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." She states the condition of women 'the second sex' or a sub-standard in comparison to man or prior to it, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) which explains how the material conditions (poverty, exclusion from education) deform women's creative possibilities and how women's genius is stifled or lost.

In the contemporary contexts, writers like Margaret Atwood who in *The Handmaid's Tale* shows how women are physically and psychologically deformed by a repressive society that treats them as vessels for reproduction. Likewise, Elena Ferrante in her Neapolitan novels depicts that in postwar Italian male-dominated society, women struggle for education and autonomy. The intense, competitive, and complicated friendship between Lila and Elena shows how women support and compete while trying to escape societal roles.

With *Troubling Love*, published in 1992 Elena Ferrante made her debut in novel writing. It is a story of Delia whose mother has found mysteriously dead. The novel became successful and won the Premio Procida-Isola di Arturo Elsa Morante award. Her Next novel, *The Days of Abandonment* is the story of Olga and how her husband's

decision to leave her affects her life. Ferrant's third novel *The Lost Daughter*, published in 2006, tells the story of a woman on a vacation where she meets a family which reminds of her own time as a younger mother.

Ferrante's most ambitious project The Neapolitan Novels (series of four novels) comprise of *My Brilliant Friend, The Story of a New Name, Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* and *The Story of the Lost Child*. These novels span about 50 years in all, chronicling the life-long friendship between Lila Cerullo and Elena Greco.

To sum-up, Elena Ferrante's novels are about attachment and jealousy, classist society from women's point of view, motherhood etc. They explore the journey of the female characters from childhood to adulthood undergoing various struggles. They also give insight into the female friendship. Moreover, the social and psychological formation of the Italian society after the World War II have a major role in the lives of the female protagonists. By her insightful and realistic writing style Elena Ferrante has gained a significant place in the contemporary world literature.

AWARDS:

- Elena Ferrante has been called one of the 100 most influential people by the *Time* Magazine in 2016.
- 2016 – Independent Publisher Book Award – *The Story of the Lost Child.*

II. The Statement of the Research Topic:

"THE TRAVAILS OF GROWTH: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN THE NEAPOLITAN NOVELS BY ELENA FERRANTE."

III. Hypothesis:

1. Elena Ferrante's novels demonstrate the intense and competitive friendship between women.
2. Elena Ferrante's novels explore psychological complexities of female friendship in patriarchal society.
3. Elena Ferrante's novels depict the struggle of the female characters to create their lives during the Post-World War Italian patriarchal society.
4. The Neapolitan Novels exhibit the influences of class and male domination on the lives of female protagonists.

IV. Data Collection:

The data required for the present research will be of two kinds:

Primary Data:

This comprises the four novels from the Neapolitan novel series of Elena Ferrante for the present research and critical opinions by the author herself. The following novels will be analyzed critically and commented upon throughout the thesis.

1. *My Brilliant Friend* (2012)
2. *The Story of a New Name* (2013)
3. *Those Who Live and Those Who Stay* (2014)
4. *The Story of the Lost Child (2015)*

Secondary Data:

In the present doctoral research, the secondary data will be the critical opinions of the major critics through printed and e-books, peer reviewed journals, articles in reputed periodicals, interviews, the reviews of the selected novels as well as from the encyclopedias and the dictionaries of literary works. All the print and e-resources, whenever necessary, will be used and acknowledged following the guidelines on research citation.

Research Methodology:

Textual analysis and the interpretative method will be the central agenda of this research work. The present research work does not call for any field work; hence, the ninth (9^{th}) edition of the M.L.A. Methodology of Research Citation will be strictly adhered to.

V. Limitations of the Study:

The present research is limited to the following four novels of Elena Ferrante.

1. *My Brilliant Friend* (2012)
2. *The Story of a New Name* (2013)
3. *Those Who Live and Those Who Stay* (2014)
4. *The Story of a Lost Child (2015)*

The Neapolitan novels will be studied to explore and analyze plot, characterization, human relations, thematic concerns.

VI. A Statement of Aims and Objectives:

1. To explore the travails of growth in the female friendship as depicted in the Neapolitan novels.
2. To critically analyze intense and competitive friendship between women in the novels of Elena Ferrante.
3. To do the critical analysis of psychological complexities of female friendship in patriarchal society in the novels of Elena Ferrante.
4. To explore the struggle of the female characters to create their lives during the Post-World War Italian patriarchal society.
5. To understand the influences of class and male domination on the lives of female protagonists.

VII. Chapter Scheme:

Chapter-I: Introduction:

The first introductory chapter will contain a detailed review of the literature in the research area.

The research methodology will be mentioned in detail with the mention to the primary and secondary resources used for the present research. In this chapter, a brief account of the life, times and works of Elena Ferrante will be provided. The chapter will also introduce the works of Elena Ferrante and their significance in the exploration of the background and beliefs of the Italian society. A brief outline of the entire thesis will also be provided at the end of this chapter. Importantly, the novels of Elena Ferrante will be introduced in their context.

Chapter-II: My Brilliant Friend:

In this chapter Elena Ferrante's novel, My Brilliant Friend will be analyzed. *My Brilliant Friend* is the first volume in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels series. It was originally published in Italian in 2011 and translated into English in 2012. The novel opens in 2010 when Elena is in her 60s while Lila has disappeared and that caused Elena to start writing their shared memories from childhood.

The novel records both the friends' journey from childhood to adolescence. Both Elena & Lila live in an impoverished town on the outskirts of Naples during the

1950s. Elena's father is a porter for City Hall while Lila's father is the town's shoemaker. In school, Lila is the only one in class who can read and write. This makes Elena to come close to her. Lila helps her in studies to get good grades. Elena continues her high school education while Lila must leave the school and work in her family's shoe repair shop unwillingly. It makes Elena to struggle in studies as Lila is not there to help her.

Though unable to continue her education, Lila often goes to the library to learn Latin. Elena is shocked to know that she is trailing her. It makes her study harder and she becomes the topper of the class. She goes to high school in the city to learn Greek. Lila also starts leaning Greek. This makes their friendship become competitive. As Lila is beautiful, she has many suitors. She chooses to marry Stefano, a grocer boy but their marriage proves to be unhealthy.

My Brilliant Friend is about the friendship of two girls. The novel is set during Post World War II Italy. The novel deals with female friendship, competitiveness, jealousy among females, class struggle and so on. It portrays the two girls becoming friends at the school level where one is excellent in studies and the other one wants to be like her. The novel shows how financial status plays a crucial role in the system of education.

Chapter-III: The Story of a New Name:

The third chapter will be the analysis of the second novel in Ferrante's Neapolitan series, *The Story of a New Name.*

The novel starts with the return of Lila and Stefano from their honeymoon. Lila tells Elena that she was beaten and sexually assaulted by her husband on their vacation. Neighbours consider Lila not disciplined and respect Stephano more. She has had an abortion but both her families pressure her into becoming pregnant again.

A doctor recommends that she must spend a season at sea to increase her fertility, and Lila asks Elena to come with her. Elena is secretly in love with Nino and she agrees on the condition that they go to the island where Nino will be. They spend their vacation discussing literature and politics. But Lila falls in love with Nino and becomes pregnant while depressed Elena has sex with Nino's father. The vacation ends, Elena focuses on her studies, and leaves for further education. Lila leaves Stefano as he too started an affair with Ada. The novel ends when Elena is in a bookstore promoting her book.

The Story of a New Name is meditation on identity, class struggle, gender roles, male domination, and personal ambition. The novel shows that escape from one's origins is never easy.

Chapter-IV: Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay:

The fourth chapter will be a study of *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*. It is the third novel in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan series. At the beginning of the novel Lila is working in a factory. She has brutal work there and she is even sexually harassed. Elena writes an article about Lila's boss but she is more harassed. Elena marries Pietro. They bore two daughters – Adele and Elsa. She has hard time writing. One day Pietro brings home Nino, her former love interest. And Elena realises that she is still attracted to him even after he abandoned her friend after their love affair. She starts an affair with him. She blames her husband Pietro for wasting her intellect by a routine with small children. And at the end of the novel, she decides to leave him.

Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay comments on the ambiguities of female friendship, the suffocating intricacies of gender roles, and the tension between capitalism and labor.

Chapter-V: The Story of the Lost Child:

In the fifth chapter, *The Story of the Lost Child* will be critically analysed. The novel starts when Elena has spent two weeks with Nino in France, returns to Naples and insists Pietro for getting a divorce. She becomes pregnant with Nino and gives birth to a girl child named Imma. Lila informs Elena that Nino is unfaithful; he has had many affairs and proposed Lila again. Elena leaves him and returns to live about Lila but Lila disappears suddenly. Elena breaks the promise of never disclosing the details of their relationship and writes a book on their lives entitled "A Friendship." Disappointed and frustrated, Lila never speaks her again. Both the girls lose their childhood, their cordiality, and sense of the world around while growing into adults. In this volume, Ferrante brings the novel to a full circle; back to its point of origin where two friends are independently raising their children side by side.

Chapter-VI: Conclusion:

The concluding chapter will sum up the different arguments and observations recorded in the earlier chapters. In the chapter, the possible areas of further research

related to this topic will also be suggested. The findings and suggestions as well as the conclusions will be reached at after discussion with the experts in academic research in novel. The chapter will also bring out the significance of the study with its relationship to the current trends and modes of literary writing. The concluding chapter will present a theoretical framework in perspective.

VIII. Importance and the Relevance of the Present Study:

An observant survey done in the research unfolds that most of the research in this genre of fiction is focused on the writers of the earlier generations. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no specialized research is yet done on the novelist Elena Ferrante. Some modern Italian writers are studied like – Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino etc. but not Elena Ferrante. Elena Ferrante has used first-person narrative style in her works. It makes readers to experience the complexities of female friendship. It is important to study Ferrant's Neapolitan novels to understand the limitations placed on women in post-war Italy and how those limitations forced to shape their lives and choices. The present study is also important as it is a close character study of two females spanning over four novels covering a period of about fifty years. The novels give insight into the hitherto rarely explored female friendship. The novels also shed light on the post-war Italian society. The study is significant in the context of shrinking space of the expressions of a woman's experiences.

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Research Student	**Research Supervisor**
Rahul Hanumant Pawar	Dr. Dnyaneshwar S. Choudhari

Date: 28/04/2025

Place: Latur